

About learning Chinese from Legation Councillor Emil Krebs

Offprint from issues 1 and 2 of the China-Archiv III. year (1918).

Since my return from China, I have noticed the zeal with which the study of Turkish is often pursued in Germany after Turkey sided with us in the war. Since this phenomenon undoubtedly stems from the desire and hope of one day finding a better future in the country or in connection with our Turkish ally with the help of the linguistic knowledge gained, it randomly made me wonder how it could be that of the many Germans who have found their way in China for years, only so few show the same zeal for learning the Chinese language.

I will probably be told that Chinese is too difficult. Some people will also say that it is not necessary to know Chinese to get ahead in China, pointing out that many Germans have achieved prestige and prosperity in China without having a clue about the Chinese language. Third parties will cite this and other reasons in the delusion that so-called pinyin English is the means of communication between Chinese and foreigners. Well, perhaps I'll leave the question of whether studying Chinese is necessary or at least useful for someone who is forced to live in China for a while. In this chat, I would just like to try to show, based on my two decades of experience, that Chinese is not a daunting difficulty, but rather that even the linguistically only normally gifted person can achieve a useful ability in it if he only applies the necessary diligence, and at the same time give some practical hints about the course of study.

These considerations exclude from the outset the officials of the interpreting profession, whose linguistic training has been adequately regulated since the establishment of the Seminar for Oriental Languages. Our interpreter trainees who have successfully completed the Chinese course at the seminar have come to Beijing so well prepared that they could be put to good use in the field of the Chinese language from day one. I see this as an invaluable advantage over the English system, which sends its interpreting trainees to Beijing without any previous knowledge of Chinese so that they can begin their studies there. So anyone who intends to go to China for a number of years in any position and has the opportunity to visit the Oriental Seminar is strongly advised to do so. The following remarks and suggestions apply to those who, whether in China or in Germany, have to rely on themselves, namely to those who want to acquire a knowledge of written and spoken Chinese for practical purposes, not to Sinologists who are experts in the field.

Now let's move on to the subject matter, the Chinese language to be learned. Is Chinese really difficult? Certainly! And if someone hears that the old generation of Chinese scholars, now dying out, spent a long life almost exclusively studying the literary products of their own language, learning to understand them and forming their own style from them, this might well have a deterrent effect. However, studying the language of the classics, philosophers, historians and poets is not

Subject of our consideration. We only want to look at practical Chinese. Those who have already acquired a taste for the language and have the confidence to master the more difficult ones may move on to the higher genres later. Fortunately, the business and official language of the Chinese people, who think soberly in business terms, has remained simple, without any swagger. The same applies to colloquial language. Polite phrases are simply memorized as vocabulary. In addition, Chinese has no inflection, no declension, no conjugation and therefore no irregular verbs! Readers who know Finnish or the conjugation system of Georgian, for example, will appreciate this fact all the more. Even Japanese, which many laypeople mistakenly believe is often lumped together with Chinese because it uses Chinese characters when in fact it belongs to a completely different language family, is far more complicated, and it is much more difficult to speak good Japanese than good Chinese. Of course, this lack of inflection does not mean that Chinese has no grammar, as I believe even scholars have claimed in the past. Language and lack of grammar are internal contradictions: every language has its own grammar, but in Chinese this does not consist of inflections, but of positional laws and grammatical auxiliary words, the correct use of which turns words into sentences. There are not very many of them and learning them is not very difficult. To speak and understand Chinese, you only need to learn these positional laws, a few grammatical auxiliary words and a number of vocabulary and idioms. Equipped in this way, you will have no trouble understanding a document of official or business content or a newspaper article (with the exception of occasional editorials, if they are in the higher style), and with the simple Chinese construction easier than e.g. a Turkish word of the same content with its convoluted gerundial compounds.

In today's China, however, the overuse of Japanese expressions is an additional peculiarity, probably an outgrowth of a certain Chinese indolence in connection with the fact that many thousands of modern Chinese youth have received their education in Japan. To me, this is the most unappealing phenomenon in business Chinese today. If these were old Chinese expressions that were adopted by the Japanese in earlier centuries from the living Chinese vocabulary of the time and that have disappeared from today's Chinese itself, then there is nothing to be said against it, perhaps such a revival of old Chinese vocabulary is only to be welcomed. Given the Chinese indolence, it is also understandable, if not excusable, that the Chinese do not use their own convenient characters to compose modern terms, but simply borrow these compounds from the Japanese, who also only form them with the help of Chinese components. But the Chinese go even further in their addiction to imitation: not only do they replace expressions that have long been naturalized with Japanese borrowings for no reason at all, such as the old t'ieh-lu for "railroad", which they now call t'ieh-tau because that is what the Japanese call the railroad (both literally mean "railroad track", cf. railway in England and railroad in America); but such expressions at least remain easily understandable even to Chinese who are not familiar with Japanese. The situation is worse with purely Japanese expressions that consist of purely Japanese elements, such as the word combination tsch'ü-hsiau, which in today's language is the usual word for "cancel, collect". This is not Chinese, but purely Japanese, which is why there is no Sino-Japanese pronunciation for it in Japanese either; in Japanese it is just called torikesu. The second half of kesu means "to cancel" in Japanese, the first half "to take", a preface to many Japanese verbs, which in itself means "to take".

is meaningless and merely reinforces the verbal concept and which in Japanese happens to be written with characters corresponding to the Chinese word ch'ü "fetch". Today's Chinese is rich in such examples; they are real foreign words in Chinese, which the Chinese person has to learn mechanically as such, since he usually cannot fathom their meaning from the Chinese characters that form them. For this reason, a Japanese dictionary is hardly dispensable for anyone studying modern Chinese.

From what has been said so far, it has already become clear that when studying Chinese for practical purposes, I also want to include writing. Of course, it is enough to know a number of vocabulary words for domestic use, for communicating with servants, shopkeepers, workers and similar people, in order to make oneself understood without having to form grammatically correct sentences. You don't need to study to do this; everyday life provides the necessary vocabulary all by itself. People who have a certain talent for languages can even hold conversations with these tools, and I was often amazed in Beijing how, for example, my wife was able to use the little Chinese language skills she had acquired without special study to hold long, successful conversations with Chinese people and explain my Chinese name (Hsia "the summer") to them when she showed friends who had traveled to Beijing around the sights and stores. A real understanding of colloquial language also requires a certain knowledge of writing. For anyone who has dealings with Chinese officials, this knowledge seems to me to be essential for understanding. The political upheavals in China have also brought a large number of Central and Southern Chinese to important positions as officials in the north, who speak standard Chinese, but only partially. Sometimes this standard Chinese is desperately similar to the native dialect of the person concerned, and yet you have to learn to understand the man. This cannot be done without frequent recourse to the characters.

It is certainly the Chinese characters that are daunting for many people. But this fear will fade when you learn that even the most complicated ones can be reduced to simple elements that are easy to learn. Although the number is enormous, it may serve to reassure you that there is probably not a single Chinese person, even among the most learned, who knows all the Chinese characters; that many of them are outdated and that, I should think, a knowledge of 2,000 to 3,000 should be perfectly adequate for our purposes and can be acquired in not too long a time, even with daily diligence. If you then come across an unknown character, the dictionary of any other language will help you look up an unknown word.

In this context, it may be interesting to learn that a Japanese person who only attends elementary school has to learn about 1300 Chinese characters. There is no consolation in the hope that the Chinese will abandon their characters in favor of a simple alphabet, be it Latin or a similar abbreviation such as the Japanese syllabary known as Katakana. It is true that there have been advocates of this among the Chinese for some time, and even attempts have already been made in this field; however, for various reasons that would go too far to mention here, I believe that this movement is fortunately hopeless. Even in Japan, the efforts of the Society for Latin Writing (Romaji-Kwai) must be regarded as having failed, and if the Japanese have come to the conclusion that their present very complicated writing system (Chinese characters, katakana and the very difficult hiragana) is preferable, then the common sense of the Chinese will be all the more reluctant to throw overboard their own ancient script, the most important unifying bond of the nation.

(just as I would regret it if the efforts to eliminate the script peculiar to us Germans in favor of the Latin script were successful).

After all, it is enough for a foreigner to know and understand a certain number of Chinese characters, even without being able to write them himself, although the latter is very desirable, if only for practical reasons, to help understanding from time to time in the course of a difficult conversation. However, this requires constant practice in writing. I used to do this by transcribing Chinese texts and later transferring the transcription back into Chinese characters. I can highly recommend this kind of practice. Of course, it is inevitable that every now and then you will have a character in mind, but will not be able to put it down on paper at the given moment. For such cases, I used to carry one of the small glossaries arranged alphabetically according to pronunciation, especially the small Goodrich, which provides excellent service for such purposes. The best writing material is a pencil. Writing with a brush according to Chinese calligraphy is a special art that requires a lot of time and effort, but is not necessary for our practical purposes.

As far as the choice of Chinese dialects is concerned, for our purposes only High Chinese (Kuan-hua, otherwise known as Mandarin Chinese) comes into question, which is best spoken by native Beijingers. The number of Chinese people from better circles who make no effort to learn it is getting smaller and smaller, and the time when it will be understood throughout the entire empire is probably not far off.

If you not only want to read Chinese, but also speak and understand it, you cannot do without the help of a native (preferably one from Beijing) at the beginning because of the pronunciation. Chinese does not have any sounds that are difficult for our speech organs; after all, it is well known that the correct pronunciation of the words of a foreign language cannot be made clear even by the most precise explanation in books. In Chinese, there is also the voice modulation of the tones, of which High Chinese in Beijing has four. It is impossible to learn them from written instructions. Some people fail to learn it even after years of listening to natives every day. But once you have grasped their essence, they are easy to use. However, if someone does not succeed at all, they need not lose heart.

Apart from a few exceptions (e.g. the word "mai", which means "buy" or "sell" depending on the difference in the tone with which it is spoken), they are not necessary for understanding, and where they are, the person speaking without a tone can avoid misunderstanding by giving a paraphrased explanation. However, the correct use of tones is part of good pronunciation, and the use of wrong tones is likely to make the same embarrassing impression on a Peking ear as the pronunciation *la batalj de Sengkangteng* on the ear of a Parisian. Incidentally, there are many otherwise excellent Chinese-speaking foreigners (e.g. most Russians I know) who have a sovereign disdain for the tones, and almost all Chinese officials I know in Beijing who come from central and southern China also don't care about them when they speak standard Chinese.

The positional laws in Chinese apply to both the written and spoken language. But the grammatical auxiliaries are different for both. However, the difference between the two languages is nowhere near as great as in Japanese, for example, where the two languages even have completely different conjugations. Also go

Nowadays in Chinese, the two languages sometimes merge to such an extent that it is not possible to draw a strict line between them and you can speak to an official about official matters in the same way as you would write an official document; you can even use the auxiliary words of the written language. Both languages have become very similar in modern Chinese. One advantage of the language is its simple clarity. A modern Chinese document only becomes unclear if, as is often the case nowadays, it was first written in a foreign language, usually English, and the Chinese translator, who knows the foreign language, tries to adapt the Chinese version as literally as possible to the foreign original, which of course cannot be done without badly violating the Chinese.

We now come to the question of resources for learning Chinese. In this respect, we are in a bad position in Germany. The Möllendorff Grammar of High Chinese and the Arendt Grammar are the only textbooks that are recommendable in my opinion; the latter explains the grammatical phenomena of the Beijing colloquial language in a hitherto unsurpassed way. The large grammar by von der Gabelentz only deals with the higher style, his small one is inadequate in the part dealing with High Chinese. The grammar of Othmer and Lessing is not free of localisms from the province of Shantung. The exercise book "Yamen und Presse", which appeared among the textbooks of the Seminar for Oriental Languages, should rather not have been printed; apart from the fundamental error that it does not only contain original Chinese documents, but also numerous translations made in German chancelleries, the accompanying glossary contains unforgivable errors. I am not aware of any other relevant German resources. In contrast, there are many in English, among which I would like to recommend the following. For colloquial language, the "Progressive Lessons" by Sir Thomas Wade retain their lasting value because of the wealth of words and idioms they contain, which are conveniently processed, as well as the collection of practical conversations published by a Japanese under the name "Kuan-hua chih-nan", partly in Beijing colloquial language, partly in good standard Chinese, for which there is also an English translation with vocabulary. Be warned against the French adaptation of this work. Edkins has published a very useful grammar of standard Chinese. I would not recommend Mateer's "Mandarin Lessons" because the book is too one-sidedly tailored to the needs of missionaries and then mixes up the dialects; what it calls Mandarin Chinese is partly Shantung language. There are a number of more or less useful resources in English, but I consider the two listed here to be the best and sufficient.

For the official style, we recommend the two works of the former Director of Maritime Customs, Dr. Hirth, the excellent "Notes on the Chinese Documentary Style", which is a grammar of the official style, and his collection of Chinese documents with glossary; also a small and very comprehensive chronology of a similar kind by Bullock. Those who have these works at their disposal can dispense with other aids of a similar kind for their studies. Those interested in the Chinese style of letters will find ample material and instruction in the excellent collection of Chinese letters of all kinds with detailed explanations (in Italian) published by the Italian Marco Guseo, a work that deserves wide distribution.

Studying a foreign language also requires a dictionary. For our purposes, only Giles' Chinese-English dictionary can be considered, which covers all varieties of the

Chinese (albeit uncritically mixed up) and thus meet all needs in a makeshift manner; the numerous errors contained therein are of no importance to the beginner. The other larger dictionaries (Couvreur, Chinese-French, Pavlov, Chinese-Russian) only deal with the literary language. As a reference book from a foreign language into Chinese, the French-Chinese dictionary by Couvreur is to be recommended, and at best the English-Chinese dictionary by Stent, for the advanced student the large "English-Chinese dictionary" published by the Commercial Press in Shanghai, which imitates Webster in its design. A few years ago, a revision of Stent's English-Chinese dictionary was printed at the expense of the Chinese maritime customs administration by the German customs director Dr. Hemeling. I have seen part of the manuscript, which the author, very much against my intention, has used to say in the preface, which is somewhat overflowing with self-praise, that I consider the book to be an excellent work, whereas in reality I am of precisely the opposite opinion.

Now a word about the method. I am of the opinion that it must be left to the talent and individuality of each person to find their own way when studying a foreign language. The methods that have become decisive for our school-based language teaching are tailored for mass teaching and, since they cannot naturally do justice to the individual nature of the individual, are not suitable for self-teaching. This also applies to our case. The following advice is therefore to be understood as merely based on the materials available today to those who undertake to learn Chinese for practical purposes, both spoken and written, while leaving room for the individual's individuality and special aptitude.

The learner first takes the Arendt or the Wade until he is able to make himself understood about the simplest things and knows a number of the simplest characters. Then he should soon start reading simple scripts. The primers for elementary schools published by the Chinese Ministry of Education seem to me to be the most suitable for this purpose. They start with simple words and sentences and are useful as initial reading for those who live in China and do not have any of the textbooks listed and without prior study, as the explanation of Chinese sentences will not cause the Chinese teacher the slightest difficulty and can be easily acquired even without a teacher with the help of any small dictionary. I assume that reading and speaking are practiced at the same time. The explanation of the grammatical phenomena is either taken from one of the textbooks mentioned, but can, if necessary, be gradually acquired through practice. I am by no means endorsing the theory of the late Professor Schlegel, who advised his students only to read, read, translate and throw the grammar books into the fire. On the contrary, I am a staunch supporter of grammatical education and mean the last sentence only for those who are not in a position to acquire one. For the rest, I can only warmly recommend the Hirth booklet mentioned above.

Once the first step has been taken, the learner is now faced with a truly bewildering array of resources. In particular, the Japanese have been diligent in creating teaching aids to facilitate Chinese studies. Apart from numerous very good conversation books, they have published collections of Chinese newspaper articles with added translation in the

written in ordinary colloquial language. There are also Chinese newspapers in the simple language of everyday life. The wealth of information available today is already so great that it is impossible to give even an approximate summary without running the risk of overlooking something useful. Once the initial study is over, the learner is free to organize his reading according to his own taste and in such a way that he simultaneously expands his vocabulary for the spoken language. Every newspaper serves this dual purpose.

It is only from Chinese novels and novels that the beginner, who is interested in further training in colloquial language and written business style, should initially keep away; for this type of literature uses a language peculiar to it, which provides little yield for our practical purposes, and on the other hand could easily tempt the uncritical beginner to take expressions from it that he cannot use. One exception is the well-known novel "Erh nü ying hsiung chuan" (History of Male and Female Heroes), which contains good colloquial language and is also of great interest in terms of content. It is surpassed in every respect by the book "Kuan tschang hsien hsing" (Present Conditions of the Civil Service), written by a former civil servant and published less than two decades ago, which partly describes the damage done to the Chinese civil service in splendid High Chinese, and which I cannot recommend highly enough to anyone who is serious about Chinese language studies. Apart from the enjoyment of the content, it enriches itself with a wealth of the most useful phrases in modern Chinese. It would be very much to be hoped that those who do such reading would compile alphabetically organized glossaries. A really good Chinese-European dictionary is currently lacking and will be lacking for decades to come. In view of the small number of people working seriously in this field and the diversity of stylistic genres, I consider the idea of such a comprehensive dictionary to be futile for the foreseeable future. However, much could be gained for a future work of this kind if everyone were to conscientiously and carefully compile glossaries of limited language areas in their own special field, which would form the building blocks for the comprehensive future work.

Finally, I would like to point out that I would be happy to provide any seriously interested party with verbal information on details that would have gone far beyond the scope of the above essay.

Printed by H. S. Hermann in Berlin